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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a technique for teaching reading to foreign language students based on the importance of structural meaning in reading processes. Students are expected to learn particular language patterns for recognition only and are not expected to produce them. Such a procedure acknowledges certain differences between written and spoken language. The author discusses the different processes required by the basic language skills, the importance of syntactic meaning in reading, and certain aspects of the transformational model that are relevant to reading instruction materials. In conclusion the author describes the procedure for presenting structure patterns for recognition in the reading class. (VM)

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TEACHING SYNTACTIC MEANING FOR READING

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TEACHING SYNTACTIC MEANING FOR READING

Abstract

It is the purpose of this paper to present one technique for teaching grammar patterns in the reading class in ESL or EFL. The students are expected to learn the patterns only for recognition and are never expected to produce them.

Three theoretical assumptions lie behind this technique and there is research evidence to support their acceptance. The assumptions are

1. The processes of decoding a language as in listening and reading are different from the processes of encoding a language as in speaking and writing. Further, reading is a problem solving activity.
2. Syntactic meaning is important in reading.
3. Certain aspects of the transformational model of describing syntax have psychological reality and are therefore useful in preparing reading materials.

The paper concludes with a description of how to present two grammar patterns to a reading class in ESL.

Reading is always listed as one of the four major areas in the study of a foreign language, and for many students reading may be the most important area. In spite of this importance however, there are surprisingly few techniques for the teacher whose job it is to teach reading in a foreign language.

One reason for this state of affairs was a reluctance in the past to acknowledge the differences between the written and spoken forms of a language. Hence, the early proponents of the audiolingual method placed heavy emphasis on learning to speak the language with the idea that reading and writing would develop naturally. (Fries, 1963) More recently, however, linguists and reading specialists are finding that the written and spoken languages are not the same. To quote Ronald Wardhaugh (1969)

> Almost any kind of writing other than the transcription of unrehearsed spoken utterances involves a certain amount of 'editing': One has only to look closely at verbatim records of child or adult language, of discussions, and of unrehearsed dialogs to realize how heavily edited is the kind of written material we usually read. Writing is not just speech written down! (p. 58)

William Norris (1970) lists a total of eleven major differences between the written and spoken forms of English. Some of these differences make written English easier to comprehend than spoken English; others make it more difficult.

Another reason for the lack of techniques for teaching reading is the little knowledge available about the reading process itself. There have been numerous attempts to describe the processes involved in reading comprehension. But, as Herbert Simmons (1970) clearly points out these attempts have failed because the researchers have not distinguished "(a) between reading and thinking, (b) between the objects and processes of comprehension, (c) between the high level cognitive processes, psychological processes, and teaching procedures of comprehension."(p. 11)

An additional problem for those of us teaching reading in a foreign language is that we do not know what the differences are between learning to read one's native language and learning to read a second or a third language. In other words we do not know what aspects of reading comprehension are "universal" and what aspects are related to the structures and concept organization of a particular language.

The areas of meaning in reading comprehension are three-- lexical meaning, structural meaning, and cultural meaning. The purpose of this paper is to present a technique for teaching structural meaning. This technique should be applicable to teaching any foreign language, but I have been concerned with English and will therefore be referring to teaching reading of English to speakers of other languages.

The purpose of this technique is to teach the students the sentence patterns which are found in formal prose such as that in textbooks. We do not need to be concerned with whether or not the students can use these patterns in speaking. For reading they only need to recognize what the pattern means. In any case, some of the sentence patterns in formal written prose are rarely if ever used in speaking.

Here are some examples of patterns that would be taught early in the reading program:

1) "There" + "be" + complement

The teacher first reviews simple sentences with the verb "be". Then he presents the pattern with "there". He emphasizes that the word "there" has no meaning by itself and that the sentences "There is a book on the table." and "A book is on the table." are the same in meaning. This pattern involves a simple but crucial transformation. Many students confuse the word "there" in "There is a book on the table." with the adverb "there" meaning a place as in the sentence "The book is there." In the written language the only clue to the difference of these two uses of "there" is the word order of the sentence.

2) Passive Voice

In teaching the passive voice the goal is for the students to recognize "who did what". For example in the sentence "The newspapers were criticized by the President." The students need to recognize that the President did the criticizing. Also in sentences like "The newspapers were criticized for their reports." the students must recognize that they do not know from the sentence who did the criticizing.

3) Relative Clauses.

In this case the goal is for the students to recognize a relative clause as a sentence within a sentence. For example: "The buildings that are located between Oakland Avenue and Atwood Street are being repaired this year." This is two sentences--"The buildings are being repaired this year." and "The buildings are located between Oakland Avenue and Atwood Street." Some of our students who do not recognize the relative clause assume that "Oakland Avenue and Atwood Street are being repaired."

Additional basic patterns involve gerunds, participles, infinitives, noun clauses, etc.

Obviously this technique is based on theoretical assumptions which must be shown to have validity or there is the danger of wasting the teacher's time as well as the students'. I would therefore like to briefly discuss three assumptions and present some evidence which supports their validity.

First of all there is the assumption that the processes of decoding a language as in reading and listening are different from the processes of encoding a language as in speaking and writing. In fact, there is the assumption here that reading is a problem-solving activity in which case verbalization of general principles aids the student in his reading. (Ausubel, 1968) Hence there is a need for special techniques for teaching skills which the students may not learn as they learn to speak the language.

Secondly, there is the assumption that syntactic meaning is important in the reading process, and therefore that students can benefit from specific instruction in the syntactic meaning of the written language. Also then, it is worthwhile using some class time for teaching grammar patterns for recognition rather than using that time for teaching vocabulary or cultural meaning.

Third, there is the assumption that certain aspects of the transformational model of describing syntax are useful for teaching reading.

Kenneth Goodman (1967) describes reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game. He bases his model of reading on a model of decoding suggested by Noam Chomsky. Goodman interprets Chomsky's model as follows: Encoding of speech results in a fully formed signal. "But in decoding, a

sampling process aims at approximating the message and any matching or coded signal which results is a kind of by-product." (p. 130) Goodman goes on to say that the reader bases his "guesses" on as few lexical, structural, and graphic clues as possible. He is aided by the fact that language is redundant and sequential.

Goodman finds support for his theory in the oral reading of first graders. Some of these children had not completely learned the sound-letter correspondences so that they were not able to make full use of the graphic clues in their reading. But the errors the children made showed that they were using other clues, for their errors did not destroy the structural or the lexical sense of the sentences. Here are two examples from Goodman's research:

1) Original sentence: Ride in, Sue.
   Child read: Run in, Sue.
2) Original: See my little red toy, Jimmy.
   It can ride in the train.
   Child read: See my little red too, Jimmy.
   It can ride in the toy.

These examples are from the reading of the same child. Notice that in the first example the word "ride" was read incorrectly, but in the second example it was read correctly. "Toy" was substituted for"train" which seems reasonable in this sentence. And, it turned out that for this child "too" was an "airplane" which was in the picture for this story. (pp. 133-134)

Rose Marie Weber (1970) conducted similar experiments with children and found the same results.

I. M. Schlesinger (1968) conducted a long series of experiments in which he attempted to discover how certain linguistic factors such as sentence length and sentence structure patterns affected the reader's performance. He was surprised to learn that his subjects performed about as well on sentences that were structurally very complex as on sentences that were less complex. In this example, the first sentence is structurally more complex than the second sentence.

1) The defendent's solicitor demanded, since he knew that the court would not, in view of the attempts revealed subsequently under cross-examination to mislead the police officers in the first stages of the inquiry, accept the defendent's statement, that the fact that his client was the head of a large family should be taken into account in giving the verdict.

2) The defendent's solicitor demanded, since he knew that the court would not accept the defendent's statement in view of the attempts to mislead the police officers in the first stages of the inquiry, revealed subsequently under cross-examination, that the fact that his client was the head of a large family should be taken into account in giving the verdict. (p. 101)

In discussions with his subjects Schlesinger found that they were using lexical meanings to understand the sentences and that sometimes they were not even sure that a sentence was grammatically correct. Schlesinger thus came to approximately the same conclusion as Goodman, that is, the reader uses both lexical clues and structural clues in decoding the written message. But Schlesinger adds that the reader uses structural clues much less than lexical clues especially when the grammatical structure of a sentence is very complex. To get a better idea of what happens, read this sentence:

> This is the hole that the rat, which our cat, whom the dog bit, made, caught. (p. 130)

Ther answer the question: Did the rat make the hole? If you answer "yes", you are relying on lexical clues and ignoring the structural clues. For, according to this sentence "the rat caught the hole" and "the cat made the rat."

Sentences like the one above are rarely written by anyone except linguists, but it has been my experience that students of English as a foreign language make the very same mistakes with much simpler sentences that are very common in formal prose. The following examples illustrate this:

1) The men who were appointed by the chairman will go to Washington.
2) Most people like the oranges and grapefruit which come from California.

In the first sentence if the student relies only on lexical clues, he may think that "The chairman will go to Washington." On the other hand, in the second example, if the student uses structural clues he can answer correctly that "Oranges and grapefruit come from California." even if he doesn't know what oranges and grapefruit are.

The second sentence illustrates how structural clues take on increased importance for students of a foreign language, because they often have a limited knowledge of vocabulary. A third reason for stressing the importance of structural clues is that they can help the student increase his content vocabulary as in this sentence:

The man who serves food in a restaurant is called a waiter.

Hence structural clues are very important for the student learning to read a foreign language. I think it would also be interesting to see if students can be taught to use the syntactic clues in reading a foreign language more than they use them in reading their first language.

The third basic assumption which I listed is that certain aspects of the transformational model of syntax are useful for teaching reading. First of all this model provides an efficient way of helping students understand the structure of complex sentences. The student can see that even long, involved sentences can be analyzed into simple sentences which he is already familiar with. The concept of transformations can be used to show the student the relationship between sentences that have the same meaning but different structures, for example sentences in the passive and active voice. Likewise the transformational model can help the student understand why sentences which appear to have the same structure are really very different as in the classic example--"John is easy to please." and "John is eager to please."

Secondly, there is evidence that the ability to recognize the underlying structure of sentences as described in the transformational model is related to reading comprehension. Simmons (1970) conducted a test in which each item had three sentences with almost identical vocabulary, but slightly different syntactical structures. The subjects had to indicate which of the three sentences had a different underlying structure from the other two. The results of this test correlated highly with the results of a standardized reading comprehension test and with reading comprehension tests constructed with cloze procedures.

Now let me demonstrate for you how the teacher can present structure patterns for recognition in the reading class.

I. "There" + "be" + complement.

Step 1: Review of known pattern.

The teacher writes these sentences on the blackboard.

<u>Ten students are in this room.</u>

<u>A book is on the table.</u>

The teacher reads the sentences aloud for the class and they repeat. He then asks simple comprehension questions such as

How many students are in this room?

What is on the table?

The class answers in chorus.

Step 2: Presentation of new pattern.

Underneath or to one side of each of the sentences above the teacher writes the new sentences.

There are ten students in this room.

There is a book on the table.

He reads the new sentences aloud for the students and they repeat. He tells them that the new sentences and the old sentences have the same meaning. Then pointing to the new sentences he repeats the comprehension questions he asked before.

Step 3: Generalization.

The teacher asks the students what is the same about the two new sentences. They should answer that the new sentences begin with "there" plus the verb "be". The teacher will also tell the students that "there" has no meaning by itself in these sentences. If necessary, the teacher may present more examples before assigning the homework exercises (see Appendix).

II. One type of relative clause.

Step 1: Review of known pattern.

The teacher writes these sentences on the blackboard and follows the same procedure as in step 1 above.

Food at Webster Hall Hotel is expensive.

Some students have a lot of money.

These students eat lunch at Webster Hall Hotel.

Possible comprehension questions are

Who has a lot of money?

Where do these students eat?

Step 2: Presentation of new pattern.

The teacher combines the second and third sentences.

Students (students have a lot of money) eat lunch at Webster Hall Hotel.

He then replaces the word "students" inside the parentheses with "who" and erases the parentheses. Finally, he repeats the comprehension questions.

Step 3: Generalization.

The teacher asks the class what "who" means in this sentence.

He also asks them what the two sentences are in this sentence.

Since this pattern is a difficult one the teacher should present one or two additional examples using "which" and "that". At least one of these examples should have the relative clause at the end of the sentence. Possible sentences are

The only apartments which are vacant are too expensive.

There are several organizations that help people with emotional problems.

After these examples the teacher can tell the students that the included sentence beginning with "who" or "which" or "that" is called a relative clause and relative clauses always follow nouns.

In summary, sentence structure provides clues which the reader needs in order to understand the written language. I have suggested a technique intended to help students of EFL and ESL gain access to these structural clues. The teacher briefly presents the pattern to the class and helps them understand the significance of the word order and important function words. The students then do additional homework exercises to reinforce what they learned in class. The purpose of the exercises is to give additional practice in recognizing the sentence pattern, and the student is never asked to produce the pattern.

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APPENDIX

Reading Exercise - "There" + "be" + complement

Read each sentence in part I and part II. Match the sentences in part I and part II. The first one has been done for you.

Part I.

___c___ 1. Thousands of students and many professors and instructors are at the University of Pittsburgh.

_____ 2. More than twenty buildings are on the campus.

_____ 3. A large library, a football stadium, a student union, and a book store are on the campus.

_____ 4. Many foreign students are at the University of Pittsburgh.

Part II.

a. There are many foreign students at the University of Pittsburgh.

b. There is a large library, a football stadium, a student union, and a book store on the campus.

c. There are thousands of students and many professors and instructors at the University of Pittsburgh.

d. There are more than twenty buildings on the campus.

Read the following paragraph and write short answers to the questions:

There are six new buildings at the University of Pittsburgh. The newest is Benedum Hall. The offices and classrooms for the School of Engineering are there, and there is also a small library for the engineering students. There are other classes in this building, too. Some of the English Language Institute classes meet there.

Now answer the questions:

1. How many new buildings are there at the University of Pittsburgh?
2. What is the name of the newest building?
3. What kinds of rooms are in this building?
4. What group of students use this building the most?
5. What other students also use this building?

Reading Exercise - Relative Clauses

For each sentence draw a line under the relative clause. Then divide the sentence into two sentences. Then answer the question about the sentence.

ex: The man who serves the food in a restaurant is called a waiter.

The man is called a waiter.
The man serves the food in a restaurant.

What does a waiter do? He serves food in a restaurant.

1. The cafeteria that is in the student union serves lunch and dinner.

Where is the cafeteria? _____

2. Most people like the oranges and grapefruit which come from California.

What comes from California? _____

3. The man who drives a bus is called a bus driver.

What does a bus driver do? _____

4. The snow that fell last night made the roads slippery.

When did the snow fall? _____

What made the roads slippery? _____

5. The men who were appointed by the Chairman will go to Washington next week.

Who will go to Washington next week? _____

6. The buildings that are located between Oakland Avenue and Atwood Street are being repaired this year.

What is being repaired? _____